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PRESENTATION

OF THE

G O L D M E D A L S,

AWARDED RESPECTIVELY TO LIEUT. J. F. A. SYMONDS, R.E., AND
TO MR. EDWARD JOHN EYRE.

Sir WM. SYMONDS being present to receive the Medal for his son LIEUT. SYMONDS, now abroad, the President addressing him said:—

“SIR WM. SYMONDS,—It is impossible that I can find expressions for the pleasure I feel in addressing from this chair an old friend on a subject so near and dear to his heart. You have kindly presented yourself on this occasion to receive, in the name of your absent and accomplished son, Lieut. J. F. A. Symonds, of the Corps of Royal Engineers, one of the gold medals which the bounty of the Queen enables the Council of the Royal Geographical Society annually to award to those who have distinguished themselves in advancing the cause of geographical science. Your son, Lieut. Symonds, has so distinguished himself; and his name is for ever enrolled amongst those who have thus made firm and solid advances towards a true determination of geographical data on one of the most interesting portions of our globe.

“Finding himself in the course of service on the coast of Syria in 1840, after the active hostilities of that year were brought to a close, Lieut. Symonds, who had been early taught to spurn inglorious ease, and being now in a country full of the most stirring reminiscences, where he had already assisted in the surveys of Jaffa, Sidon, Acre, and Jerusalem, was fortunate enough to be selected by his commanding officer to undertake the survey of a portion of Syria: and the result of his labours in the year 1841, notwithstanding the interruption occasioned by fever, was the triangulation of the country between Jaffa and Jerusalem; and thence to the head of the Dead Sea on the S.; and from Cape Blanco to Saffet and the Lake Tiberias on the N.; these two main lines being connected by intermediate triangles. In the northern part of the country the topographical features, with the towns and villages, have been laid down in detail, and with minute exactness. Whilst the operations were going on, Lieut. Symonds, being supplied with an 8-inch theodolite, was enabled to ascertain the difference of level between the Dead Sea and the Mediterranean, and also between the Lake of Tiberias and the Mediterranean: the Dead Sea being 1312.2 feet, and the Lake of Tiberias 328.98 feet below the sea on the nearest point respectively.

The solution of this problem, which has been a subject of discussion amongst geographers and travellers for the last ten years and more, and to the importance of which, as a remarkable terrestrial phenomenon, Alexander von Humboldt makes a very particular allusion at the close of the third volume of his last work on Central Asia, forms an important era in the history of geographical knowledge; and it is to your son a most honourable commencement in that useful career of applying mathematical science to practical purposes, in which you, in a sister service, have so nobly pointed out to him the way.

“I beg leave to place in your hands the Patron’s gold medal, awarded to your son by the Council of the Royal Geographical Society for the promotion of geographical knowledge.”

To which Sir Wm. Symonds replied:—

“Mr. President,—In the name of my son Lieut. Symonds, I beg to express the most cordial acknowledgments for the kind feeling that dictated the flattering address which you have just pronounced on the subject of my son’s labours in Syria. I rejoice that his indefatigable exertions have merited the high honour which the Geographical Society have been pleased to confer on him; for his zeal in the pursuits of science only yields to love of his profession.

“Allow me also to mention that, while he was proceeding with his triangulations in the Holy Land, he expressed a strong desire to be employed in ascertaining the level of the Caspian Sea, which has long been a question very important to science, and is still an object of much interest to all geographers, former attempts having failed owing to the want of a proper instrument. If my son should be fortunate enough to be selected for that service, and have the same instrument which was entrusted to him in Syria, I have no doubt that he will solve the question, and deserve the further commendation of the Royal Geographical Society.”

Mr. Eyre being in Australia, the Medal was received for him by the Secretary. The President said:—

“In presenting to the representative of Mr. Edward John Eyre the Founder’s Medal, awarded to him by the Council of the Royal Geographical Society, the Council are happy to mark it as the first instance, in which such token of their approbation has been bestowed for discoveries in a part of the world first made English by our great circumnavigator Captain Cook, and which throughout its immense extent has already been the scene of many a daring adventure and hardy enterprise, not surpassed by any of those which have been exhibited by our countrymen in every other portion of the globe.

“In 1837-8 Mr. Eyre distinguished himself by an attempt to penetrate into South Australia from New South Wales, by the Murumbidgee, Australia Felix, and the Wimmera; following down the latter river until it should fall into the Murray, Lake Alexandria, or the sea. In this journey he discovered the fresh-water lake Hindmarsh, but could only reach South Australia by retracing his steps through Australia Felix, and by the Murray.

“ In 1839, Mr. Eyre started from Port Lincoln in South Australia, to determine the practicability of an overland route to Western Australia; but he was driven back by want of water and the difficulties of the country; and on his route directly across from Streaky Bay to Spencer's Gulf, he discovered a mountain range trending from N.W. to S.E., towards the different points from Middle Back Mountain to Elbow Hill.

“ Proceeding to the N. of Spencer's Gulf, he discovered that extraordinary geographical feature, Lake Torrens: this put an end to his progress in a northerly direction; on which he returned to Spencer's Gulf and struck across the country to the Murray.

“ Again, in June, 1840, ever ready to the call of the colonists, who wished to know what were their locomotive powers, what bounds were set to them, and whether the traversing of this great continent from S. to N. was in truth feasible or not, Mr. Eyre returned to the head of Spencer's Gulf, where, at the foot of Mount Arden, he had formed a depôt; thence having advanced for 400 miles along the eastern bank of the Lake Torrens, he was again obliged to desist; and in the view of making a second struggle (as he could do nothing to the northward) to penetrate towards Western Australia, he sent some of his drays by his old track to Streaky Bay, and himself repaired to Port Lincoln to complete his preparations for a second attempt to reach King George's Sound. The hardships and sufferings experienced by Mr. Eyre in carrying out this project were beyond description; the whole distance being above 1000 miles, full one half of it entirely destitute of water, and consequently of herbage or fruit, the only scanty supply of the former in this dreary waste being obtained by digging in the drifts of pure white sand found along the coast at places where the great fossil bank receded a little from the immediate margin of the sea. Mr. Eyre describes the table-land of the interior to be of the most desolate and barren character imaginable, almost entirely without grass, destitute of timber, and in many parts densely covered by an impenetrable scrub. On two different occasions the party were entirely without water for seven days, and almost the same time without food. In the latter half of the journey Mr. Eyre was only accompanied by one person, a native of King George's Sound: three native youths having deserted from him in despair, after they had murdered the overseer, who was attempting to detain them.

“ Mr. Eyre mentions, in terms of merited thanks, the kind conduct of Captain Rossiter, commander of the Mississippi, a French whaler, who, near the western extremity of the great Australia Bight, gave him hospitality on board his ship, recruited his horses, and provided him with supplies for prosecuting his journey to King George's Sound. The expedition from Fowler's Bay on the frontiers of South Australia and Western Australia occupied the whole time from the 25th of February, 1841, to the 7th of July; and though, as Mr. Eyre confesses, his labours had not been productive of any discovery likely to prove beneficial to the colony, we, as geographers, are not the less inclined to give him our tribute of applause for the obstacles he overcame, and for having sent home a large addition to our knowledge of the geographical features of this anomalous portion of the globe.”

The Medal was then handed to the Secretary, who replied:—

“Mr. President,—I receive with unfeigned pleasure the commission of forwarding to Mr. Eyre this valuable testimony to his merits as a most zealous and enterprising explorer in a country so little known as Australia. At the same time, Sir, I cannot but regret that there should be no personal friend of Mr. Eyre here to represent him on this occasion: some one who, from intimate acquaintance with him, could give utterance to the feelings with which I am sure he will be animated when apprised of the award of this Society. This much, Sir, I am sure, I may safely take upon myself to say, that Mr. Eyre will not only look upon this Medal as a high reward for his past exertions in the cause of discovery, but as a stimulus to still further efforts. I may perhaps be permitted to add, in the words of one who knows Mr. Eyre well, and has had abundant opportunities of knowing of what he is capable, ‘that there are few men upon whom expectation may more strongly rest for future exertion in the extension of geographical knowledge.’”
